

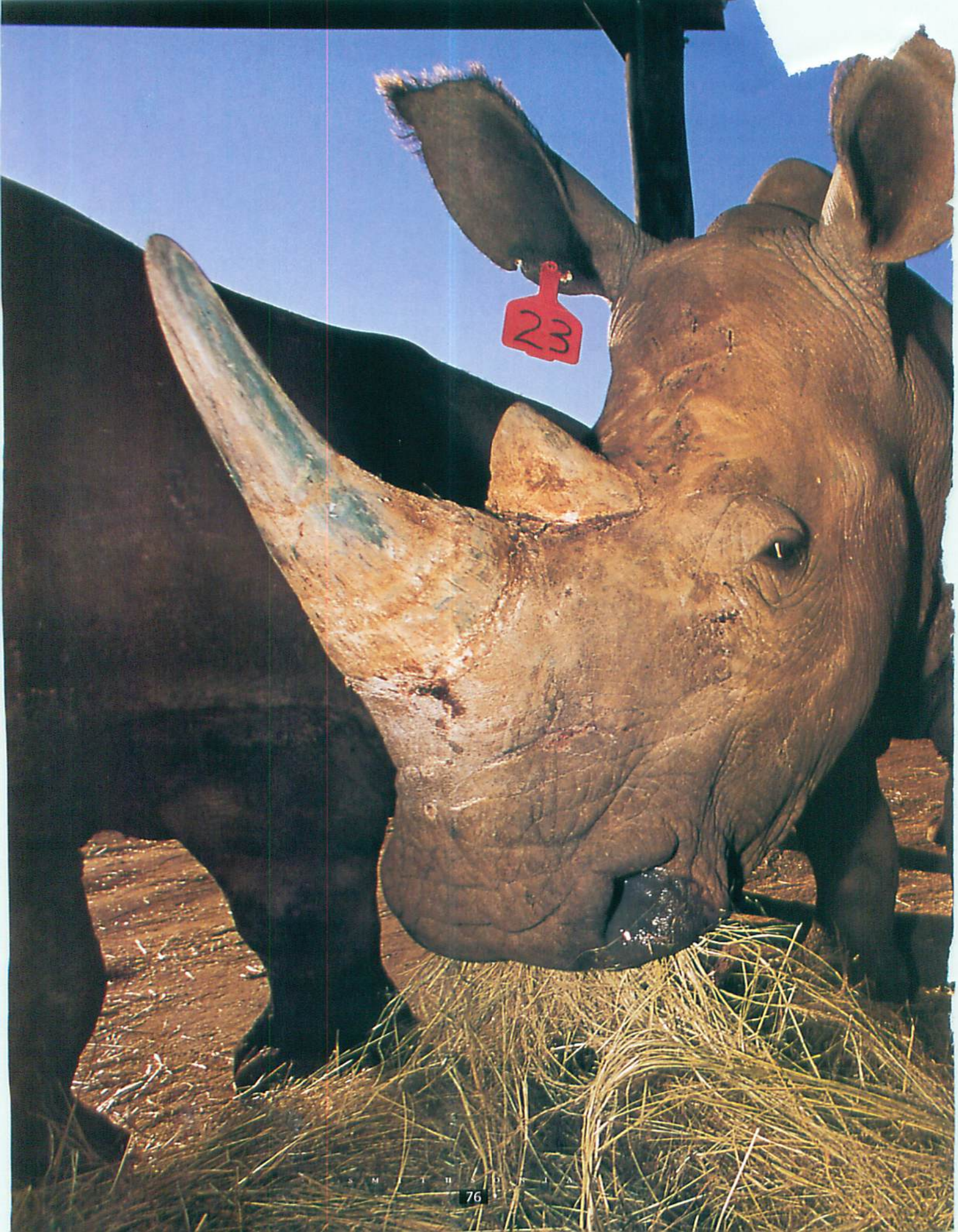
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Spring Reigns
in Brussels' Palace of Glass

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A white rhinoceros is seen in a holding pen, partially obscured by a dark, semi-transparent text box. The pen is constructed with wooden posts and metal railings. The background is a clear blue sky. The rhino is standing on a dirt floor, and there is a pile of hay in the foreground.

THE RHINOS ARE BAAACK!

BY DOUG STEWART

IN SOUTH AFRICA THESE HEFTY, UNPREDICTABLE
AND INQUISITIVE BEASTS ARE FLOURISHING AND
HAVE BECOME VERY BIG BUSINESS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JIM LEACHMAN

At the KwaZulu-Natal auction, a white rhino grazes in its boma, where buyers can take a close look from the catwalk above the holding pens.

THE BLACK RHINOCEROS STANDING AT THE EDGE OF THE CLEARING LOCKS EYES WITH ME AND STARES MALEVOLENTLY.

Or it seems to—rhinos have poor eyesight. And they always look irritated, if not downright angry. “He’s not in a good mood,” David Bradfield whispers to me as we sit in an open Land Rover 50 yards away, watching the rotund young bull as he stamps his feet and exhales loudly through his nostrils. In the driver’s seat, Riaan Pretorius starts up the engine, just in case. Bradfield and Pretorius work at the

Lapalala Wilderness, a spectacular private wildlife reserve in South Africa with nearly one-eighth the land area of Rhode Island. Lapalala has dozens of wild rhinos, and the rangers know them all. This is Mapateng, an ornery 2-year-old who already weighs close to a ton. With an explosive snort, he bolts a few yards toward us in a mock charge, then turns and swaggers back to his ponderous two-ton mother, Punyane, who continues to browse.

Black rhinos are unpredictable beasts. When they charge, they often keep coming—and they’re capable of covering 45 feet in one second. “I was watching a group of rhinos a few weeks ago,” Pretorius says quietly as we study the animals, “when the wind changed.” A large male put his head down and came straight for him. Pretorius quickly climbed the nearest tree. “I stayed up there and had a smoke,” he says. (Treed humans can’t always relax. A black rhino at the Hluhluwe reserve in KwaZulu-Natal Province used to reach into a tree’s branches and try to hook people out with her front horn. The rangers there called her Poking Polly.)

People and rhinoceroses prefer similar habitat but don’t mix very well, which is one reason rhinos have almost vanished from the earth. Outside Africa, rhinos have long had a potent, even mythical, reputation thanks to their imposing bulk and almost prehistoric appearance. A rhinoceros was paraded through Rome in 29 B.C. to celebrate Augustus’ victory over Cleopatra’s Egypt. Marco Polo thought they were unicorns. But newcomers moving into rhino country were often less admiring. Observing a large bull shot by his expedition in South Africa’s Cape in 1801, William Somerville deemed it “beyond comparison the most awkward and ugly of quadrupeds.” Since the 19th century, people have shot them for protection, for sport, for their horns—used in Asia for folk remedies and in Yemen for dagger handles. Before the close of the 20th



century, the death toll was staggering.

Like the giant panda, the rhinoceros is now a worldwide symbol of endangered megafauna. Asia’s three species of rhino—the Javan, Sumatran and Indian—cling to survival in a few protected refuges. Africa’s two species—the black, or hook-lipped, rhinoceros (*Diceros bicornis*) and the white, or square-lipped, rhino (*Ceratotherium simum*)—have been killed off in one impoverished, land-hungry country after another. But here the story has a twist. In South Africa, rhinoceroses are flourishing. The country has two of the three significant populations of endangered black rhinos left in Africa and close to 90 percent of all the southern white rhinos remaining on the continent. The numbers of both are climbing year by year.

A key reason is game privatization. South Africans now buy, sell, breed and ship wild animals—white rhinos especially—as if they were racehorses or Pomeranians. Rural landowners are selling off their cattle, bringing in expensive game, and charging admission. The country’s thousands of private reserves now account for three times as much conservation land as its expansive national parks. Some conservationists in the West tut-tut about the seeming crassness of it all, but South Africans just point to their game counts.

“In 1962 we had one breeding population of white rhinos in the whole of South Africa,” says George Hughes, head of the KwaZulu-Natal Nature Conservation Service (KZN-NCS), whose breeding stock has fueled the white rhinos’ comeback. “Today we have well over 250 breeding populations.” Many of those, he says, are in private hands.

The Lapalala Wilderness, occupying a huge swath of

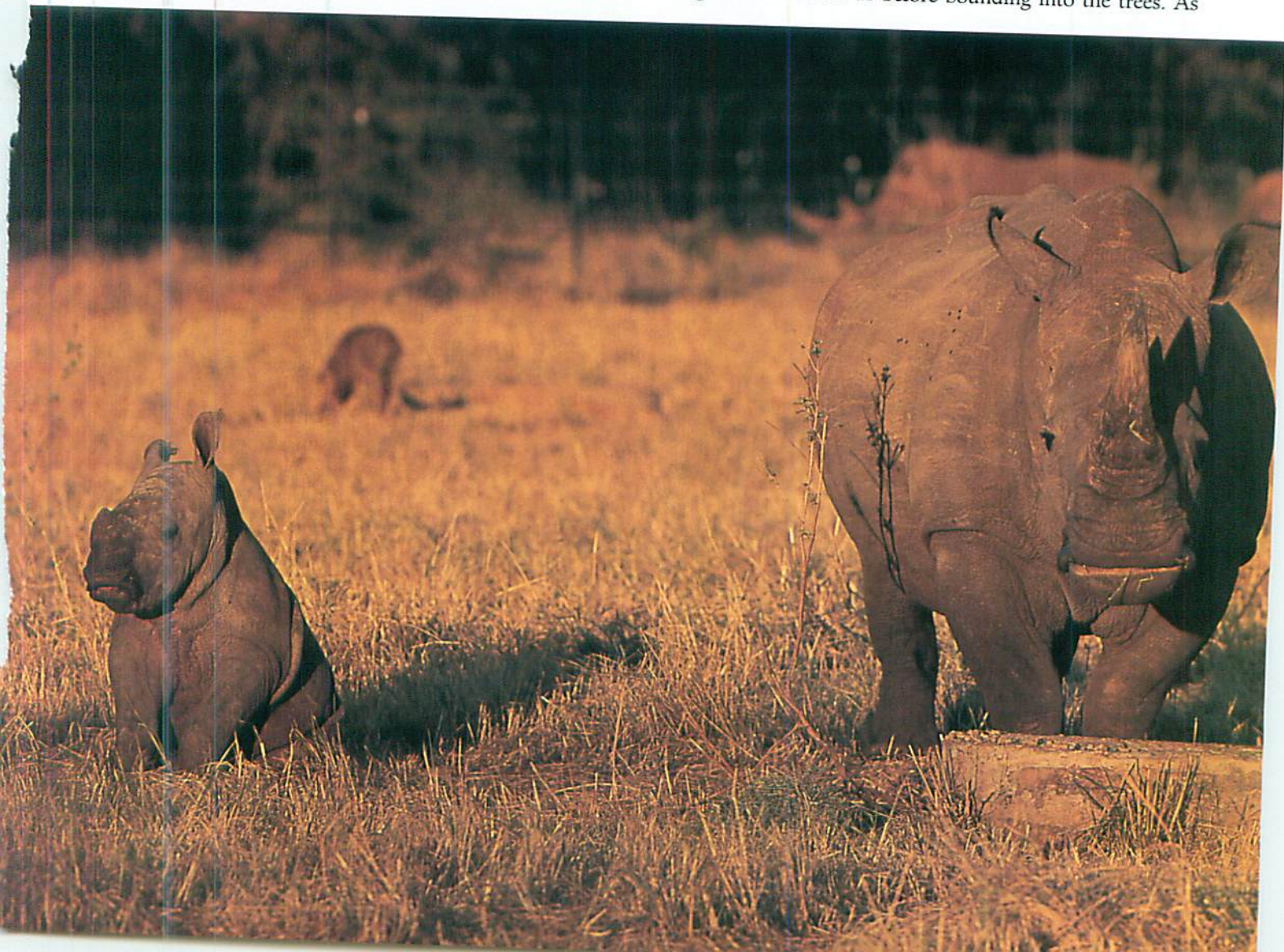
A black rhino shows off its flexible upper lip (above) used to reach for foliage to eat. A white rhino baby and its mother thrive on a private reserve near Kruger National Park.

rugged bush veld in South Africa's remote Northern Province, is one of the most significant private sanctuaries for rhinos in the world. Dozens of white and black rhinos roam the enormous refuge, along with giraffes, zebra, hippos, Cape buffalo and antelope. The preserve was created in 1981 by a South African writer, Clive Walker, as a non-profit tourism and education center with backing from a Cape Town businessman, Dale Parker. Walker is delighted so many private landowners have followed his lead.

"Everyone seems to be buying rhinos," he tells me as we huddle around a fire on a chilly night at one of Lapalala's rustic bush camps. "There are more than 10,000 white rhinos in private and government hands in this country now." The post-apartheid government has slashed its nature-conservation budget so it can pay for long-overlooked social needs. Yet to the surprise of pessimists, the number of rhinos in the country is growing, not diminishing—"in spite of the fact that it's now permissible to hunt white rhinos here." Walker, a still-dashing 64-year-

old who's bagged a lion or two in his day, estimates that 45 to 50 white rhinos, typically older bulls, are shot by trophy hunters each year (none at Lapalala). Black rhinos remain off-limits. "Private enterprise now looks at the game industry as something worthwhile to get into," he says. "People are willing to pay more than \$30,000 apiece for white rhinos. They are mostly buying them not for hunting but to breed them and sell the offspring at a profit, and for tourism. It's amazing how this has developed."

Early the next morning, I tag along on a foot patrol with Bradfield and Pretorius. Ahead of us on a high grassy plateau studded with flat-topped acacias and velvet bush willows, game trackers Andries Mokwena and Martiens Mpaga are following a set of fresh white rhino tracks. The white rhino is reputed to be less dangerous than the smaller black rhino, but only relatively. In the distance, herds of blue wildebeests and impalas graze. A lone kudu bull with gorgeously striped flanks and curlicuing horns watches us before bounding into the trees. As





As Kruger park veterinarian Douw Grobler pulls a blindfold over the eyes of a drugged white rhino, a game-capture team struggles to guide the bull toward a transfer crate.

we hike, all I can make out of the rhino's trail are the impressive, still-warm dung piles that punctuate it.

Then, almost casually, without a word, Mokwena and Mpagu crouch down in the tall grass. A short distance upwind, four white rhinos—a bull, a cow, and her calves—are placidly munching grass in a clearing. These are the largest land mammals on earth, aside from elephants and hippos, but their low-hanging bellies and scrawny tails remind me at first of a much smaller pachyderm, the pig. "That's Poacher," Bradfield whispers, pointing to the largest of the four. "He's one of our older bulls." With his blimplike girth and lethal-looking front horn, Poacher is an impressive specimen. On the black market, that horn alone could fetch \$10,000, though it's nothing more than a tight bundle of fibers, similar in composition to a fingernail. (Claims for the rejuvenating powers of ground rhino horn are thus about as valid as believing that chewing your nails will make you live longer.)

"See his wide mouth?" Pretorius whispers to me. "That's different from the black rhino's. And the heads of these animals are much bigger." Both white and black rhinos, he says, are actually gray. White is probably a mistranslation of the Afrikaans *weit*, or wide, to describe the white rhino's low-hanging mouth, adapted for grazing. The black rhinos we saw earlier had smaller, higher heads and prehensile

upper lips, which reminded me of a rudimentary elephant's trunk as they grabbed twigs and foliage rather than grass.

Now the foursome seem to get wind of us, literally. They stop grazing and stare suspiciously in our direction, their ears swiveling like radar dishes sweeping the horizon. A rhino's sense of smell, like its hearing, is acute—its nasal passages occupy more space than its brain does. With surprising agility for so hefty a beast, Poacher begins to pivot in place, his massive head helping counterbalance his hindquarters. As a full-grown rhino, he may lack natural predators, but he's skittish all the same. Abruptly, the animals move off at a trot. They somehow carry their bodies lightly as they move, their tails held high.

I glimpse scars on Poacher's back—wounds from a poacher's spear in Natal some years ago, says Bradfield. With better security in the past decade, he says as we head back to the Land Rover, poaching is not as dire a threat to South Africa's rhinos as it once was. A more likely killer of rhinos here is probably other rhinos. "If you have too many bulls, they're going to start killing each other," he says. A shy and serious-minded 29-year-old, Bradfield, like Pretorius, wears shorts and hiking boots in even near-freezing weather. As wildlife manager here, he has the responsibility of knowing where all the rhinos are and, if necessary, interceding if there's trouble—

calling in a vet perhaps, or moving a troublemaker elsewhere. Doesn't a good wildlife manager, I ask, let nature take its course? Isn't Africa supposed to be wild?

"But is African wildlife natural?" Bradfield replies. "It's not anymore. We've got fences all over Africa, especially in South Africa." This very reserve, all 140 square miles of it, is fenced. In effect, the rhinos and other big game are all here by invitation. (Elephants, lions and spotted hyenas have not been invited.) Even Kruger National Park, Bradfield points out, a wildlife sanctuary the size of Israel, has an electrified fence around its entire perimeter. "These are not natural systems, so we

above two rows of roofed pens, I look down on an ark's worth of African wildlife, from antelope to zebra. All of it is for sale, from the nyala bulls with green ear tags and protective plastic tubing on their horns, to the pairs of giraffes circling restlessly in narrow pens like slow-moving two-bladed propellers. Nagel isn't selling rhinos today, he says apologetically, but he will next year. Lions too.

Outside the auction barn, I chat with a middle-aged couple, John and Val Thorp, who own a 6,000-acre ranch nearby. (For rural white landowners, that's fairly modest. For blacks, it's unimaginable. Though apartheid has formally ended, most blacks still live on communally owned tribal



Giraffes, along with other African wildlife from antelope to zebra, are available at game auctions. Brandon Leer, auctioneer (center), leads the bidding at the huge KwaZulu-Natal sale. A white rhino bull (right) is off-loaded after capture and will be sold to the highest bidder.

have to control the animal populations inside them."

Indeed, game fences are ubiquitous in South Africa. Outside the dusty hamlet of Vaalwater, I stop at the Nyathi Ranch, one of many private game ranches in the region. The owner, a tough-talking Afrikaner named Martin Nagel, is about to hold a game auction in a barn out back. "Every year, game prices in South Africa break the previous year's record," he says, as we go out to watch an oversize tractor trailer unload a shipment of live giraffes, wildebeests and waterbuck. "The prices keep climbing." From a catwalk

lands or in rented shacks in crowded black townships.) The Thorps already own seven white rhinos. "We just got chased by three of them yesterday, a mother, a father, and baby," Val tells me. "I shouldn't say 'chased.' They followed us, like a dog would. They're very inquisitive."

Their neighbors Simon and Danielle Rood join us. "The warthog's pregnant again," Danielle announces. "We've never seen so many pigs," adds Simon.

"That's probably why the leopard's moved in," John says. "That's the way it should be," says Simon, though the

old-time cattle ranchers don't yet agree, he adds. Leopards will keep the warthogs and impalas in check without troubling the larger game. These people may live in ranch houses, I realize, but suburbanites they're not. The Thorps are planning to build a new house inside their game fence so they can watch the rhinos from their picture window.

What with all the game fences that South Africans are erecting, livestock trucks have replaced migration as the usual mode of long-distance transport for wildlife. Catching and moving rhinos and other large, dangerous animals has become a precise, fast-moving, almost military-style operation involving lots of people and heavy equipment. On a

trucked to uncrowded corners of the immense park or to other parks and private buyers. The dazed bull I'm watching is one of four due to be rounded up this morning. Like a punch-drunk prizefighter, it's now swaying on its feet, shuffling and snorting. People and trucks begin moving in from all sides. With the bull still on its feet, Grobler, a gruff, stoop-shouldered man with an obvious air of authority, strolls up, retrieves his dart and pulls a large blindfold over its eyes. Then, with both hands, Grobler shoves the dazed creature over onto its big, rounded side.

The team goes to work—taking blood samples, setting ropes, readying a crate. As a long line of rangers prepares



cool winter morning in Kruger National Park recently, with patches of mist still blanketing the veld, I watch from the back of a crowded white pickup as a white rhino staggers into a clearing. A few minutes ago, veterinarian Douw Grobler, chief of Kruger's game-capture team, leaned out of a jet helicopter and fired an immobilizing dart into the bull's rump. The chopper now hovers just above the trees, herding the woozy animal toward the road before it drops.

Kruger is home to between 3,000 and 4,000 white and perhaps 500 black rhinos. Surplus animals are regularly

to heave on a line tied to the rhino's handy front horn, Grobler grabs a syringe with a fast-acting antidote. Drugging a rhinoceros is a tricky business. You want it groggy enough not to kill you, yet lively enough to do its own walking; even 20 rangers couldn't lift a full-grown rhino. Grobler jabs the bull behind the ear, and within a minute or two it starts to come around, hissing and panting under its blindfold. The boss of the rope-hauling chorus line calls out, "Right, if the rope goes, it's everyone for himself! Pick your vehicle." I edge toward the white pickup, but the



Conita Walker, who runs a rhino orphanage at Lapalala, gives local children an up-close and personal encounter with a 5-year-old white rhino named Munyane.

ropes hold, and within 20 minutes the bull is packed inside the steel crate, the crate winched onto a large flatbed truck, and the truck roaring down an asphalt road to the park's rhino boma, or holding pens. In a month or two, it will be snorting and wallowing behind someone else's game fence.

Amazingly, Kruger Park used to have no rhinos at all. In 1892, in fact, white rhinos were presumed to have disappeared from the planet altogether, victims not of poaching but of European hunters and land clearing. A few years later, a pocket of survivors was discovered in a valley between the Black and White Umfolozi rivers. The thousands of white rhinos in Africa today, including every one of Kruger's, trace their lineage to that remnant population. (Black rhinos, by contrast, were abundant into the 1960s. Then rampant poaching nearly exterminated them. From 100,000 in 1960, their numbers in Africa plummeted to barely 2,500 by 1992. Today, though still vulnerable, black rhinos have rebounded somewhat to just under 3,000.)

The wild patch of riverine bush veld where the white rhinos had hidden in the 1890s is today part of the Hluhluwe-Umfolozi Park game reserves, now teeming with rhinos and other big game. The KwaZulu-Natal Nature Conservation Service (née Natal Parks Board) has been selling the excess to the highest bidder since 1988. The annual KwaZulu-Natal Game Auction is the Kentucky Derby of wildlife sales, attracting high rollers and setting game-price records.

The day before the auction, prospective bidders window-shop the zoolike rhino bomas on a hilltop at Umfolozi. In the wooden-pole pens are more than 40 rhinos, white and black; hoof stock is cloistered at a separate locale. The rhinos here may be captive, but they're certainly not tame. The first black rhino I approach is exuding bad intentions.

He immediately makes a mock charge, then backs up and charges me again. Not satisfied with that, he trots off into the main enclosure in back, spins in place, then hurtles straight at me from 30 feet, skidding to a stop with a loud burst of spray from both quivering nostrils, his horn jutting between the boma poles. This animal obviously wants not only to break out of this joint but to puncture me and anything else on two legs once he's out.

Or perhaps not, according to Louise Dainty, a confessed rhino lover who's here with her sister. She disputes the idea that this animal is essentially two tons of

anger. "Yesterday I scratched his head," she says delightedly. She demonstrates how she'd cooed to him in a quiet voice. "And he went, 'Hmm? Hmm?' as though he were speaking to me. He came right up, and I scratched his little head!" Indeed, one of the oddities of black rhino behavior, experts say, is that their fierceness in the wild can be offset by a calmness in captivity. Even Poking Polly was a pussycat when confined.

People move up and down the rows of pens, scribbling on their auction lists like bettors marking up racing forms. One of them is Mike Englezakis, who owns the Thabana Safari Lodge near the Botswana border. The lodge hosts ecotourists part of the year, hunters at other times. Well-dressed and blunt-talking, Englezakis makes no apologies for his belief that South African wildlife, including white rhinos, is a consumable good. "The world has millions of cattle, pigs and chickens," he says, "for only one reason: because we raise them in order to eat them." Trying to protect Africa's wildlife by sequestering it on public land won't work, he says. "Human needs will always come first, for better or worse. The minute there is no more grazing for my cow, the wildebeest must die, because it doesn't belong to anyone. The cow is mine, it's worth money, so I've got to protect it." By putting a price tag on a rhino, a zebra, or a kudu, he says, so that people can own it and make money from it—dead or alive—the species is suddenly worth cultivating. "For wildlife to survive," he concludes almost fiercely, "it has to become a cow."

The next day's auction once again set a record, earning the parks agency more than 15 million rand or about two million much-needed dollars. The six black rhinos, destined to be stars at a new tourist safari park in the



White rhinos are plentiful on John Hume's ranch, where he introduced "green hunting." Hunters shoot specific rhinos with dart guns so the animals can be examined or transferred.

Eastern Cape, account for more than \$300,000 of that.

Even the booming market for rhinos, however, doesn't guarantee their future in South Africa. One of the game industry's weaknesses is that it's a white man's business. "For local black communities, game conservation so far hasn't given many tangible benefits other than jobs," says Khulani Mkhize, the KZN-NCS's new acting CEO. Owning a piece of a new tourist camp or restaurant could pay off in the long run, he says, "but where do they get the money to buy equity in these businesses?"

In the new democratic South Africa, if conservation continues to be a game for the white elite, the safety of rhino sanctuaries, public and private, can never be ensured. "Our game reserves remain fortified areas with highly trained guards carrying automatic weapons," says Lawrence Anthony, a Natal conservationist. "The reason is the demand for land by impoverished rural communities next to them." Many public reserves sit on traditional lands, he says. The apartheid government would proclaim a park and expel the inhabitants. Today many communities want to get their land back. "They've got good memories," Anthony says. "They know exactly where the traditional boundaries are."

A return to subsistence farming and cattle grazing inside the parks would, of course, be an ecological disaster. Instead, Anthony has been working in partnership with several tribal communities on the edge of the Hluhluwe and Umfolozi parks to establish an adjoining Royal Zulu Game Reserve. Anthony hopes the reserve, which would rival Lapalala in size, will once again be home to hundreds of white and black rhinos.

Nokwethemba Biyela, a leader of the Biyela tribe, is a driving force behind the new reserve. She has brought local people (most of whom had never seen a live rhino) to visit the Umfolozi reserve. "Ten years ago, if a black person visited a game park in South Africa," she says, "it was like he was trespassing." Small wonder many blacks have mistrusted wildlife authorities more than poachers.

Says Anthony, "If we involve these people in building their own game reserves and they start benefiting, we'll protect the rhinos. I don't see another way to do it." 🗿

Contributor Doug Stewart lives in rhino-free New England. Jim Leachman photographed an elephant orphanage in Kenya for SMITHSONIAN in the March 1997 issue.